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National Heart Lung and Blood Institute
Diseases and Conditions Index

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Asthma

Key Points

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- Asthma is a chronic disease that affects your airways, the tubes that carry air in and out of your lungs.
- In asthma, the inside walls of your airways are inflamed, or swollen. The inflammation makes them very sensitive, and they tend to react strongly to things that you are allergic to or find irritating. When they react, they get narrower and less air flows through to your lungs. This causes symptoms like wheezing, coughing, chest tightness, and trouble breathing, especially at night and in the early morning.
- Asthma cannot be cured, but most people with asthma can control it so that they have few and infrequent symptoms and can live normal, active lives.
- When your asthma symptoms become worse than usual, it is called an asthma episode or attack. In a severe asthma attack, the airways can close so much that not enough oxygen can get to your vital organs. People can die from severe asthma attacks.
- Taking care of your asthma is an important part of your life. Controlling it means working closely with your doctor to learn how to manage your condition, staying away from things that bother your airways and bring on asthma symptoms, taking medicines as directed by your doctor, and monitoring your asthma so you can respond quickly to signs of an attack. Ask your doctor for a written daily asthma self-management plan and an emergency action plan for asthma attacks, and make sure you understand and know how to use them.
- Researchers still do not know what causes asthma, although they do know that if other people in your family have asthma, you are more likely to develop it. Being exposed early in your life to things like tobacco smoke, infections, and some allergens may also increase your chances of developing asthma.
- Some of the more common things that bring on asthma symptoms include exercise, allergens, irritants, and viral infections.
- Common asthma symptoms include coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, shortness of breath, and faster or noisy breathing.
- Doctors find out whether you have asthma by looking at your family history of asthma and allergies, exploring the things that seem to cause your symptoms or make them worse, and giving you a test, called spirometry, that measures how much air you can blow out of your lungs after taking a deep breath and how quickly you can do it. They may also perform tests to find out if you have allergies, to see how your airways react to exercise, to find out whether you have gastroesophageal reflux disease or sinus disease, and to rule out heart disease and other lung diseases.
- Asthma is treated with two kinds of medicines: quick-relief medicines to stop asthma symptoms and long-term control medicines to prevent symptoms.

- Short-acting inhaled beta-agonists are the preferred quick-relief medicine. The most effective, long-term control medicine is an inhaled corticosteroid, which reduces inflammation in your lungs. Most long-term control medicines must be taken daily, even when you do not have symptoms.
- Other long-term control medicines include inhaled long-acting beta-agonists, leukotriene modifiers, cromolyn, and theophylline.
- Most asthma medicines are inhaled. As a result, they go straight to your lungs where they are needed. It is important to learn how to use your inhalers correctly.
- Many people with asthma need to monitor their condition with a peak flow meter. This is a hand-held device that measures how well your lungs are working. A peak flow meter can help you detect early changes in your condition, especially if you change your medicines, and warn you of a possible attack even before you feel symptoms.
- Parents of children with asthma need to help them manage their asthma, including making sure the child uses his or her medicines properly and watching for any signs of an attack.
- Older people with asthma may need to adjust their treatment because of other diseases or conditions that they have. Some medicines that many older people take can interfere with asthma medicines or even cause asthma attacks.
- It is especially important for pregnant women with asthma to control their asthma. Uncontrolled asthma can limit the supply of oxygen to the fetus. Doctors recommend that it is safer to take asthma medicines during pregnancy than to take the chance that you will have an attack.
- Regular physical activity is just as important for people with asthma as for the rest of the population. If exercise brings on your asthma symptoms, talk to your doctor about the best ways to control your asthma when you are active.

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